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ORGREAVE AND THE BATTLE FOR STEEL

MID-APRIL marked the first watershed in the miners' strike. The majority of Nottinghamshire miners were still working, but more than 80 per cent of miners were out on strike. Control of the strike had been formally vested by the conference in the hands of the NUM's national officers with the aim, in Peter Heathfield's words, of 'taking the strike by the scruff of its neck'.

The scale and toughness of the struggle ahead began to sink into ruling-class commentators. The *Financial Times* had already spelled out what was at stake for Thatcher and her cabinet:

The government regards the miners' dispute as its major industrial test since 1979. It shares the view of Mr Arthur Scargill . . . that the dispute is an all-out challenge to its authority . . . For that reason, and because miners' strikes were instrumental in the downfall of the Heath administration, it cannot lose it. Every tactic pursued by the National Coal Board, by the police and the government itself is viewed in that harsh light: will it bring the government down?¹

Thatcher established a special inner cabinet of senior ministers to direct the government's strategy. The body, known as MISC 101 and meeting twice a week, consisted of Leon Brittan (Home Office), Nigel Lawson (Treasury), Peter Walker (Energy), Tom King (Employment), Nicholas Ridley (Transport) and Sir Michael Havers (the Attorney-General). Also in attendance were Brigadier Tony Budd and David Goodhall from the government's strike-breaking organisation, the Civil Contingencies Unit, whose role in the strike

has been kept very secret.

The Tories had enjoyed one victory so far. *The Times* claimed that the police operation in Nottinghamshire represented a 'shift in the balance of power in outbreaks of violent, or potentially violent industrial disorder' — as significant 'a benchmark in the history of industrial relations' as Saltley had been.²

But Thatcher had miscalculated — the campaign to use a national ballot to beat the strike had collapsed dismally. Now she decided to play a waiting game. Hence the care with which the Tories avoided using the 1980 Employment Act, despite the fact that it made mass picketing illegal. The government also did their best to avoid provoking any other group of workers into joining the miners on strike.

What were the choices facing the miners' national strike committee? Could the strike win with Nottinghamshire at least partly working? To do so would require the most determined mass picketing of targets outside the coal industry, designed to affect strategic sectors of the economy as rapidly as possible. These tactics, by showing that the strike was biting, might also persuade the Nottinghamshire scabs that it was worth joining their fellow miners on the picket lines.

In other words, to win victory in 1984 they had to use the methods of 1972. Scargill himself had given the best defence of those methods:

We took the view that we were in a class war. We were not playing cricket on the village green. Like they did in '26. We were out to defeat Heath and Heath's policies because we were fighting a government. Anyone who thinks otherwise was living in cloud cuckoo land. We had to declare *war* on them and the only way you could declare war was to attack the vulnerable points. They were the points of *energy*: the power stations, the coke depots, the coal depots, the points of supply. And this is what we did.³

It was, of course, the flying pickets organised from below which actually carried out this strategy. But official NUM policy in 1972 was also absolutely emphatic in its aim of hitting the economy as hard as possible. Instructions issued to pickets on 12 January 1972 stated: 'The aim of the NUM picket is to prevent the movement of coal and alternative fuels between power stations, coal depots and other coal consumers.' NUM general secretary Lawrence Daly issued detailed guidelines:

2. *Power Stations* — all movement of fuel and stocks at power stations should be stopped . . .
4. *Steel Works* — coke supplies from coking ovens for steel works should be stopped.

In 1972 the main picketing battles were fought at the power stations and coal depots. Two years later in 1974, the steel works, the main industrial consumers of coal, assumed a greater importance. Scargill recalled:

We launched our main attack in Yorkshire on this occasion, at the giant Anchor steel works complex in Scunthorpe; because it was clear that if we could stop the huge Anchor works we could halt British industry . . . The Anchor works closed down in two weeks. Production went down to 50 per cent, then 25 per cent . . . Historians, when they look at this, will see that the real crunch came in the '74 strike with the steel works.⁴

The real crunch came with the steel works in 1984 too. But this time the story was different. The powerful Area leaders of the NUM in Yorkshire, Scotland and South Wales chose to allow steel production to continue. And the most serious attempt to use the tactics of 1972 by cutting off the supply of coking coal to Scunthorpe, the mass pickets at Orgreave in May and June, were to end in defeat for the miners. How and why did this happen?

The phoney war in steel

Coal consumption in Britain in 1981 was as follows:

Electricity supply industry	87.2 million tonnes
Coke ovens	10.8 million tonnes
Industry	7.0 million tonnes
Domestic coal	8.6 million tonnes
Others	5.0 million tonnes
<i>Total</i>	<i>118.6 million tonnes</i>

The Central Electricity Generating Board was far and away the NCB's biggest customer. But it was clear that even with effective mass picketing, it would take some time before power cuts were forced on the CEBG. First, the power stations had massive coal stocks (24.3 million tonnes at the beginning of the strike). Secondly, the strike had begun in the spring, unlike the 1972 and 1974 disputes, both of which

were fought out in the depths of winter when demand for electricity was high and the closing of a single power station could trigger power cuts.

To win quickly the miners would have to hit directly at industry itself. Steel held the key to this strategy, for not only were the British Steel Corporation's coke ovens the main industrial consumers of coal, but hitting steel would rapidly affect other sectors of the economy, above all the motor and engineering industries. Moreover, steel production was concentrated in four major works, all, naturally enough, near coalfields — Scunthorpe in Yorkshire, Ravenscraig in Scotland, and Port Talbot and Llanwern in South Wales. They were, therefore, well-suited as targets for a co-ordinated campaign of mass picketing.

Indeed, the strike had begun to bite before the end of March. The *Financial Times* reported on 26 March: 'Production at the British Steel Corporation's Scunthorpe works will be cut by half this morning because of a fear of a coal shortage.' The plant had a month's supply of coal (100,000 tonnes) a fortnight earlier, but now stocks were running low. One of Scunthorpe's three blast furnaces was shut down that day.

The paper had more gloomy news for big business the following day: 'Some Midlands foundries may run out of coke this week because of picketing by miners of coke ovens and depots.' It was bad news again on 28 March. Llanwern, the *FT* said, 'may be forced to shut down soon unless it receives fresh supplies.' The implications were plain enough — as steel plants and iron foundries shut down, the motor and engineering industries which depended on them would be forced to cut production.

Tragically, the opportunity created by this situation was thrown away. In the first instance, the miners' leaders relied on agreements with other trade union leaders rather than on mass picketing to halt the movement of coal. The Triple Alliance of coal, steel and rail unions had been created to co-ordinate action in defence of jobs. Militant trade unionists had called its predecessor in the 1920s the 'cripple alliance', and so it was to prove again.

The very composition of the Alliance doomed it to failure. The Iron and Steel Trades Confederation general secretary Bill Sirs was on the right wing of the TUC. He was a firm supporter of the 'new realism'. Indeed, he had practised it at British Steel, acquiescing without a fight in the disappearance of 100,000 jobs in the previous four years. If Sirs wasn't prepared to fight to save steelworkers' jobs, he was hardly likely to exert himself for the miners.

The leaders of the Alliance met on 29 March and pledged to halt the movement of coal. Within 24 hours Sirs had broken ranks. The main thing, he said, was to keep steel production going, even if that meant accepting scab coal. Sirs even had the face to accuse the miners of threatening steelworkers' jobs: his members weren't going to be 'sacrificed on someone else's altar'.

This setback did not cause the miners' leaders to abandon hope of winning the ISTC's co-operation. Instead, their attention focused on the possibility of local alliances. This approach had already been pursued before the strike, especially in Scotland and South Wales. Promising statements were forthcoming from local ISTC leaders. But this locally-based approach had the opposite effect to that intended. Rather than close the steel works down, it led the NUM Area leaderships in Scotland, South Wales and Yorkshire to give 'dispensations' which allowed the supply of coal to the main steel plants.

The dispensations were the result of concerted pressure from BSC management and the steel unions, who argued that if the steel works were deprived of coking coal, their furnaces would fall in. The result would probably be the permanent closure of one of the three steel strip mills, Port Talbot, Ravenscraig or Llanwern.



South Wales pickets applaud as a driver turns back from Port Talbot steelworks

In 1972 and 1974 the instructions from the NUM executive to pickets to cut off all coal to steelworks had been implemented to the letter. The blast furnaces had been shut down, their linings had fallen in, and these had to be rebuilt after the strike. There was, however, nothing inevitable about this. During the 1980 steel strike the furnaces had been 'off wind' for 14 weeks without serious damage being caused.

The threat that one of the three strip mills, probably Ravenscraig, might be closed was a real one. But it had nothing to do with the miners' strike. BSC Chairman Robert Haslam told the House of Commons select committee on industry that he could meet foreseeable demand with two strip mills and still have 10 per cent spare capacity. The possibility of a closure was on the cards anyway — but the government now used this threat to play the Areas off against each other.

The steelworkers were a deeply demoralised group of workers. Their strike had been beaten by the Tories in 1980, and they had seen the workforce more than halved as a result. They had in Bill Sirs a leader who had made a virtue of abject surrender. Now the BSC management tightened the screw. Not only did they hang the threat of closure over the steelworkers' heads. At Scunthorpe they announced that lay-offs would start on 28 May unless coal supplies were guaranteed. BSC boss Bob Haslam accused the miners of trying to persuade the steelworkers to sign a 'suicide pact'.

It was not surprising that the steelworkers should give in to this blackmail. Much more unexpected was that the presidents of the three main left-wing Areas of the miners' union — Jack Taylor of Yorkshire, Mick McGahey of Scotland, and Emlyn Williams of South Wales — should fall in with them. But they did. Williams called the pickets off Llanwern and Port Talbot; McGahey signed an agreement on 6 April under the aegis of the Triple Alliance in Scotland to allow coal into Ravenscraig; and Taylor promised on 10 April to supply Scunthorpe with coal.

The Area leaders justified their actions by arguing that the steelworks were essential to their local economies. McGahey said the Ravenscraig agreement was 'in the interests of Scotland's industrial future'.

Taylor, McGahey and Williams had effectively conceded the argument. To be effective in defending their own jobs the miners had to hit industry. Inevitably this would lead to other workers being laid off. In 1974 Heath had tried to isolate the miners by imposing the

three-day week on the whole of industry. But by defending their own conditions then, the miners had made it more difficult for the Tories to attack those of workers in other industries — including steel. The same applied in 1984.

There were many rank-and-file miners who understood this better than their leaders. 'The only way to win the strike is by stopping people working,' said one Scottish miner at the height of the controversy over Ravenscraig. 'First they'll chop us, then they'll chop Ravenscraig,' said another.

The ostensible purpose of the dispensations was to allow enough



coal into the steelworks to keep the blast furnaces stoked — and no more. However, the terms of the agreements concluded were vague enough to allow British Steel to drive a coach and horses through them.

For example, Ravenscraig's normal consumption of coal was 24,000 tonnes of coal a week. Only 6,300 tonnes a week were needed to keep the furnaces going, so the Triple Alliance agreement ought to have led to a sharp fall in the amount of coal going into Ravenscraig. If anything the opposite was true. Although details of the original agreement were not made public, it apparently did not place *any* limit



Fifeshire miners blocking the road after police had stopped them travelling to the BSC Hunterston terminal. Nearly 300 were arrested.



on the tonnage of coal which would be let into the plant. Instead, it merely stated that two trainloads of coal a day would be allowed into the works. As one Scottish miner put it, 'How much is a trainload of coal? It's a bit like asking how long is a piece of string?'

The Ravenscraig works is in Motherwell, near Glasgow. Before the strike it received 14,000 tonnes of imported coal every week through the docks at BSC's own port in Hunterston. The rest of its coal came from Polkemmet colliery. With Polkemmet on strike, all Ravenscraig's coal came through Hunterston. Aryshire miners picketing Hunterston in late April noticed that the train for Ravenscraig had two diesel engines rather than the normal one. They counted the wagons, and there were eight more than usual.

Railway and steel workers sympathetic to the miners estimated that, through tricks of this nature, the two trains were bringing into Ravenscraig 4,000 tonnes of coal a day, far in excess of the 900 needed to keep the furnaces going. One of Ravenscraig's mills achieved record production in April — in other words, McGahey's dispensation was enabling British Steel to maintain or even increase output.

The pattern was similar in Scunthorpe. Miners at Silverwood, Cortonwood and Barrow collieries were asked by Jack Taylor to supply Scunthorpe with 15,700 tonnes of coal a week. This was far in excess of what was needed to keep the furnaces stoked. At the end of April Scunthorpe was producing approximately 24,000 tonnes of steel a week.

The Area dispensations were not to Arthur Scargill's liking. Once the special NUM conference had vested control of the strike in the union's national officers, he intervened. In a speech in Cardiff on 28 April he insisted that no dispensations should be made to allow coal into steelworks.

But Scargill's initiative was blocked by the Area executives. As was to become more and more clear in the course of the strike, the National Union of Mineworkers existed only in name. Power still rested in the hands of the Area unions, and the decisions of the special conference did nothing to alter this. Increasingly Scargill was to come into conflict with his own allies, the left-wing Area officials, over the direction of the strike.

Emlyn Williams, the South Wales NUM president, had warmly applauded Scargill's call for no steel dispensations in Cardiff. He then went on to the Welsh TUC and struck a deal allowing four trainloads of coal into Llanwern steelworks. The plant's stocks of coal had run out at the end of April, posing a direct threat to other parts of

industry, since Llanwern produced body panels for Ford, Austin-Rover and Volvo. NUM members at Nantgarw coke works, from which the coal for Llanwern was supposed to come, rejected the deal, but were hammered into line by the Area executive.

A South Wales NUM official told the *Financial Times*: 'We don't want to see Llanwern close, and we are sure enough coke will go through.'⁵ One Llanwern steelworker commented:

Over 4,000 jobs have gone in the last four years since the defeat of the steel strike. There's no guarantee the place will stay open, but one thing is certain: it has even less chance if the miners go down to defeat.

Only in Scotland was there some attempt to reduce the supply of coal to British Steel. On 27 April the miners' and rail unions agreed that only one train of coal would run each day from Hunterston to Ravenscraig.

The BSC management reacted aggressively. On 2 May they announced 'emergency measures'. The coal would be moved by road. Within hours of the announcement convoys of lorries began to make the trip from Hunterston to Ravenscraig. Drivers were paid £50 a trip to scab. The strategy could work only because the steel unions had agreed to handle deliveries by road. The Ravenscraig convenor, Tommy Brennan, declared: 'Our people will use any coal that comes into this plant.'

Over the next few days there were running battles between police and picketing miners outside the steelworks. On 4 May the rail unions decided to halt the daily trainload of coal to Ravenscraig in response to the scab lorry operation. On 7 May 1,000 pickets clashed with the police at Ravenscraig, but the convoy of 58 lorries got in through a back entrance. Fifty-two miners were arrested. The next day mounted police attacked the pickets and 65 miners were arrested.

McGahey told a rally in Glasgow, part of a day of action called in solidarity with the miners by the Scottish TUC: 'I'm calling on the whole of the trade union movement to close Hunterston and Ravenscraig and bring about a solution of this problem.'

The next day Fife miners had a taste of the state of siege in Nottinghamshire. Eight coaches bound for Ravenscraig were stopped by the police on the main Stirling-Glasgow road. The miners reacted to this by sitting down in the middle of the road. Nearly 300 were arrested.

Meanwhile McGahey was busy behind the scenes — not to

mobilise wider solidarity action, but to negotiate a deal with the steel union. On 11 May the Triple Alliance in Scotland announced a new agreement, to allow 18,000 tonnes of coal into Ravenscraig every week, nearly three times more than was needed to keep the furnaces going.

On 17 May an agreement was struck which allowed the supply of coal to Ravenscraig to be resumed. One chance to close the cracks in the steel blockade had been lost.

The dead hand of officialdom

Vacillations by trade union officials, even left-wingers such as Mick McGahey, were nothing new, either in the NUM or generally in the British working-class movement. But from the very start the 1984–5 miners' strike was distinguished especially from its predecessor in 1972 by a very high degree of control exercised by the full-time officials of the various NUM Areas. There was little of the independent rank-and-file organisation so notable in the struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The precise manner in which the strike was run varied from Area to Area. In South Wales picketing was organised by Area strike committees covering several pits. An official from Tower colliery, where more than half the 600 miners were actively involved in the early weeks of the strike, explained: 'The Welsh NUM executive in Pontypridd tells us the target and the rest is organised by the individual strike committees, who then take it to each lodge. The chain of command is very fast.' Later, as the picketing began to shift from the Midlands pits to secondary targets such as power stations and steel-works, the executive re-established a dominant and deadening hand.

The tremendous rundown of the Scottish pits had left miners scattered widely, many still living where collieries had once been, but were no longer. The organisation of the strike in Scotland was, therefore, geographical, around mining communities rather than on a pit basis.

The smallest unit was the strike centre, typically based on a miners' welfare. The various centres fell under one of the four Area strike committees for Scotland — Ayrshire, Central, Fife and Lothian, and these in turn were subject to the Scottish NUM executive. In Ayrshire, the strike centres were scattered around a 90-mile radius from the two pits, Barony and Killoch. Two centres, at Netherthird and Drongan, co-ordinated the others, having responsibility for eight

and five centres respectively, and acting as a channel for funds.

The organisation of the Area strike committees in Scotland varied. While the Ayrshire strike centres were run by committees elected at mass meetings, the Area committee consisted of the NUM agent and the Ayrshire members of the Scottish executive. The Central and Lothian Area committees, however, were composed of delegates from the various strike centres.

This structure made possible a degree of rank-and-file involvement at the strike centres. 'The lodge delegates aren't involved,' said one Ayrshire miner. 'The ordinary men are the ones who run our strike committee.'

Much of the strike centres' activity was, however, devoted to welfare activity — chopping wood, organising soup kitchens, dealing with social security cases. Money and picketing instructions came from the NUM headquarters at Gardiner Street in Edinburgh, via the Area strike committees. The Communist Party and its left Labour allies ran the strike through their control of the Scottish executive and of the Area committees.

Yorkshire, the most important Area out on strike, was organised on rather different lines. No special structure of strike committees was created there, perhaps because of the much denser concentration of miners and pits. Instead the NUM leadership relied on the existing union organisation: the branch committees ran the strike. In practice, the branch officials — the president, secretary, delegate, and treasurer — tended to have a decisive say.

Above the branches were the four Area panels — Doncaster, Barnsley, South Yorkshire and North Yorkshire. But whereas in the strikes of 1969, 1970 and 1972 the panels had acted as a focus for rank-and-file organisation and initiative, in 1984 they acted as channels for instructions from the NUM headquarters in Barnsley which arrived via the NUM agent responsible for the Area.

An Area strike co-ordinating committee was set up, consisting of the three Area officers, Jack Taylor (president), Sammy Thompson (vice-president), and Owen Briscoe (general secretary), along with the president and delegate from each branch. The committee was more an extension of the union bureaucracy than a means of giving control over the strike to the rank and file.

The full-timers did not use this power to encourage the involvement of the mass of the strikers. Rank-and-file activists repeatedly told how strikers would volunteer for picket duty, only to be told they weren't needed. So the history of the strike is one of repeated upsurges

of initiative and activity from below, each in turn sat upon by branch and Area officials.

This led to enormous variations in the actual level of picketing, from Area to Area, and from month to month. In Yorkshire, Kent and Durham, for instance, there was a fairly high level of picketing, with about one-sixth of the strikers involved on a more or less regular basis. In Scotland, by contrast, the level of picketing was kept low most of the time, while in Wales an initial flurry of activity was quickly dampened down.

There was plenty of rank-and-file initiative and ingenuity to be tapped, as two examples from Scotland in April show.

In Ayrshire the Coal Board management launched something of an offensive against the strikers over the issue of safety. At Barony colliery they appealed to the miners to go into work to rescue a coalface. The face was at the end of its life, and working would have cost the strikers their social security payments, so they refused.

At the other Ayrshire pit, Killoch, the NCB insisted that all 176 members of the overmen's union, NACODS, should go into work, even though three 14-man shifts were all that was needed to maintain minimum safety cover. The strikers responded with a 350-strong mass picket, which, despite 11 arrests, forced the deputies to operate only minimum cover.

'After these successes there was a huge rise in people's morale,' a member of Netherthird strike committee said. 'Before then we were finding it difficult to get enough people to picket a night. Now the picketing rotas are booked up for three weeks in advance.'

Around this time one miner turned up for picketing duty at Ravenscraig to be told by the miners he was relieving that 17 empty coal lorries had gone in overnight. The drivers had said they were coming in to collect breeze, the decomposed remains left after coal has been burned. A quick telephone call established that breeze, when mixed with powdered coal, makes a combustible substance which can be re-used in power stations. Another phone call brought more pickets to Ravenscraig — and the lorry drivers were persuaded to turn back and dump their loads of breeze.

Small victories of this nature have been used to build up rank-and-file involvement in the strike. But the union officials were not interested in encouraging initiatives from below. On the contrary, they did their best to discourage them. One miner in South Yorkshire described in early April how 'the officials took control of the purse

'strings' at the beginning of the strike, and used it to keep the pickets in line:

It was all getting a receipt, sending it to Barnsley, waiting who knows how long for it to come back and being told it might not be paid at all because there's a question-mark over the funds being sequestered. So lads went out and asked other trade unionists to help us with funds. We started to be able to picket and take initiatives ourselves. When we decided something needed picketing, we went there, without filling in official receipts and forms and whatnot. All of a sudden Barnsley didn't like this and said there was only £2,000 coming into the Area strike fund. Now they've put up a notice saying that any picket going anywhere where he's not been sent by Barnsley will not be legally represented if he gets arrested.

There were also conflicts between the rank and file and the officials in Scotland. Money was an issue there too. The Scottish Area executive sought to centralise financial control by insisting at the beginning of the strike that all donations to the NUM went to Edinburgh. The money was doled out from Gardiner Street in small amounts. Indeed, many of the more active strike centres were in late April dependent on direct donations from other trade unionists for the majority of their funds. For example, one Lothian strike committee, Arniston, had received £1,403 up till 25 April, of which only £600 came from the Area strike committee for pickets' petrol, while the rest came from direct donations.

The other conflict in Scotland was over Ravenscraig. The Triple Alliance agreement caused considerable bitterness among many of the active strikers. 'If you're going to back off, back off, and back off, it's not worth having a strike,' one Lothian miner said. The bitterness was reflected in the support given to an open letter initiated by SWP miners and signed by a number of strike committee members. This called on Mick McGahey 'to come out clearly and publicly with the statement that from NOW ON no coal beyond the minimum required to maintain the furnaces at Ravenscraig will be officially sanctioned.'

The Scottish Area leadership reacted ferociously to the letter. Communist Party members denounced the 'sinister forces' of the SWP at the Lothian joint strike committee. **Socialist Worker** was banned from a number of strike centres in the Lothian and Central Areas. Nevertheless, rank-and-file discontent over the dispensations

may have played some part in persuading Mick McGahey to cut down the supply of coal to Ravenscraig at the end of April.

Generally, however, control of the strike was firmly in the hands of the full-time officials. The Yorkshire Area leadership evolved a method, the so-called 'envelope system', which kept the direction of the pickets in the hands of the Barnsley HQ. Each night a sealed letter was sent to every Yorkshire branch telling them where to picket the next day. The system was introduced to prevent the police from learning where the pickets were going in Nottinghamshire, but it put control firmly in the officials' hands. The secrecy made it difficult to campaign openly for mass pickets of strategic targets. Moreover, pickets were often sent to different places each day.

The result was gypsy picketing — the core of activists moving from one place to another. Those miners who were prepared to disobey the instructions would not receive petrol money, and ran the risk of not having the union's legal help if they were arrested. Especially during the battles of Orgreave, the envelope system had disastrous results.

Were the Tories weakening?

Despite the stalemate over steel, the strike had already gone a long way further than the NCB and the government had expected. It had now lasted two months, longer than either of the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974. Despite vicious press campaigns and policing heavier than any yet seen in an industrial dispute, the Tories had been unable to isolate and crush the militant Areas. Apart from Nottinghamshire, the miners were solid.

There were signs that some on the government side thought it time to back off.

On 23 April Ian MacGregor told the overmen's union NACODS and the coal managers' union that he was prepared to discuss the timescale of the closure programme. There followed some 'shuttle diplomacy' by Labour's energy spokesman, Stan Orme — the Labour leadership were concerned to end the strike because picket-line clashes alienated the floating voters they needed for the next election — and the Coal Board and the miners' executive met on 23 May for the first time since the strike began.

The meeting lasted less than an hour. MacGregor rejected the NUM demand that he call off the closure programme and walked out. But presumably this was for public consumption — for the very next

day Jim Cowan, MacGregor's deputy, wrote to the union offering talks on the basis of the 'Plan for Coal'. *The Economist* commented on 26 May:

The breakdown of Wednesday's talks came after a week of rising expectations that some kind of deal might be patched up. Privately the Coal Board was signalling that it would help construct ladders for Mr Scargill to climb down, without in any way compromising its own plan to close high-cost pits and bring capacity down four per cent in line with demand. It was not to be . . .

Yet the gap between them [the NCB and NUM] . . . appeared very narrow on Wednesday when Mr MacGregor told journalists that he was prepared to be pragmatic about the four million tonnes capacity cut . . . He clearly meant that closures in 1984–5 could now be smaller than the original plan. Partly because of production lost in the past eleven weeks of strikes and nineteen weeks of overtime ban. The board has invited the union to further talks at which, in Mr MacGregor's words, 'the four million tonnes is up for discussion'.⁶

The shift in the Coal Board's stance reflected a change in the government's strategy. As Peter Jenkins emphasised in *The Guardian*, 'every move is their move, every major decision, whether by the police or Mr Ian MacGregor, threads its way back to a member of the cabinet.'⁷ Thatcher called Cowan's letter 'a very wise offer'. So why were she and her ministers now prepared to countenance negotiations?

Three factors seem to have been involved. First, there were possible divisions on the Tory side. Peter Jenkins argued that 'peace talk is emanating from what may be called the traditional elements at the National Coal Board. These are the industrial relations specialist managers and the mining engineers.' On the other hand, 'the prime minister and her cabinet are guided by a single paramount consideration: in confrontation with Arthur Scargill and his pickets the elected government must win, win decisively, and be seen to win.'⁸

There was some evidence for this theory, but it does not explain why MacGregor himself adopted a conciliatory approach in May 1984.

A more plausible explanation may be that Thatcher herself was having second thoughts about the strike. As we have already seen, the Tories in all probability did not expect the dispute to escalate into a protracted and intense national confrontation, even if they had made

preparations for that eventuality. Already after Scargill's defeat of the NUM right wing in mid-April, some shrewd commentators were sketching out the possibility of a government retreat. Anthony King, an academic advisor to the SDP, wrote:

Thatcher not only respects power (whether the miners or anyone else's) . . . In the present dispute, Mrs Thatcher has clearly worked out that the NCB has more power than the NUM. Coal stocks are high; the union is divided. The strike will probably not last long. When it peters out, Mr MacGregor will have closed pits and, as a bonus, weakened the union.

But suppose the prime minister has got her sums wrong and the strike becomes economically and politically damaging? . . . then the prime minister will almost certainly signal to the Coal Board that a few pit closures could, after all, be postponed, that there turns out, after all, to be a little slack in the NCB's cash position.⁹

There was, by late May, some evidence that Thatcher had got her sums wrong. The government found itself in the middle of pay negotiations involving power workers, nurses, teachers, water workers, civil servants, railway and postal workers. It therefore faced the danger that other unions might join the miners and open a second front against the Tories.

To this was added the danger that the government's strike-breaking operation might itself provoke other workers to come out on strike. The brief possibility of a Scottish dock strike in mid-May, sparked by ISTC and BSC scabbing at Hunterston, highlighted the risks the Tories were running.

There were also stirrings among Thatcher's opponents on the Tory back benches, the 'wets' led by ex-ministers such as Edward Heath and Francis Pym. Veterans of the strikes of the early 1970s, they were no friends of the miners. But they began to make coded speeches about the strike 'damaging the fabric of society'. They were worried that the government's methods, especially the policing of the strike, might alienate a large and important section of the working class permanently from the state. The British ruling class has always preferred to rule by fraud rather than by force.

There might also be a third, more sinister explanation of the Tory strategy — namely, that Thatcher was playing a double game. In other words, the purpose of the talks might simply have been to string

the miners along, softening them up until the government felt confident enough to take the offensive.

On this analysis, Thatcher and MacGregor were the hard cops, ready to rough up the suspect, while the soft cops, the NCB negotiators, offered tea and sympathy. After all, Thatcher had played this game before. In the build-up to the Falklands war, she allowed Francis Pym, then Foreign Secretary, to play the Argentines along with the prospect of negotiations, and then ordered the sinking of the Argentine battleship **General Belgrano**.

In all likelihood, all three factors — internal divisions, a genuine search for compromise, and the velvet glove strategy — were present. Thatcher may well have been uncertain in her own mind about what to do — until the first battle of Orgreave showed that she could, after all, win a decisive victory.

Whatever the truth of these speculations, the talks represented a serious danger to the miners. Had an agreement been made along the lines envisaged in May and June, the closure programme would have been delayed rather than completely abandoned. This would allow MacGregor to resume the attack again whenever the time seemed opportune. It would be very difficult to persuade miners to strike again after all the sacrifices made to achieve an indecisive outcome.

Arthur Scargill seems to have been well aware of this danger. He progressively shifted the focus of the series of talks held between the NUM and the Coal Board to the question of 'uneconomic pits'. It was long-standing policy of the mineworkers' union that pits should be closed only when they had run out of mineable coal reserves. For the government and the NCB, however, the crucial issue was not whether there was any coal left in a pit, but whether it could be extracted profitably. 'Uneconomic' pits, in other words those where the cost of mining coal was too high, should be closed.

The issue was fundamental. Although couched in terms specific to coal mining, it raised a much more general question, that of profitability. Millions of workers in Britain and throughout the world had lost their jobs because it was no longer profitable to employ them. Now the miners were saying that this should stop. It was a challenge to the entire logic of the capitalist economy. If the miners were able to defend 'uneconomic' pits it would be a victory indeed.

The NCB hoped to be able to isolate Scargill within the miners' executive. The right wing were a spent force. But the Board was looking for other elements on the left of the executive who might be

more accommodating than Scargill.

All such speculations were, however, rendered idle by the decisive event of the strike — the mass pickets outside Orgreave at the end of May.

Orgreave: the turning point

Pressures from both sides helped to precipitate the battles of Orgreave. The Yorkshire Area's policy of dispensations to the Scunthorpe steelworks was coming under increasing fire. Some of the criticism came from below. At the SWP's initiative an open letter to Arthur Scargill was circulated among Yorkshire miners calling on him to force the Area leaderships in Scotland, Yorkshire, and South Wales to cut off all coal supplies to BSC. Some 250 miners signed the letter. On 22 May several hundred miners took part in an unofficial picket of Scunthorpe which was denounced by the Area strike committee.

It is clear that Scargill himself was pressing Jack Taylor to take some action. A behind-the-scenes conflict between the miners' president and his former close collaborators in the Yorkshire left surfaced publicly during the struggle over Orgreave.

But, as so often during the strike, the initiative that sparked things off came from the other side. The British Steel management at Scunthorpe had insisted on using the coal allowed them by the NUM to continue production, rather than just keep the blast furnaces warm. The quality of coal reaching Scunthorpe had deteriorated dramatically over the previous six weeks as the stocks of prime coking coal in South Yorkshire were used up. The result was a serious deterioration in the two working furnaces, and in the quality of the iron they produced. On 21 May there were two explosions in the Queen Mary's furnace, and a fire.

That same day BSC approached the local ISTC official, Roy Bishop, to demand that they receive 5,000 tonnes of coking coal immediately. Approaches were made to Labour Energy spokesman Stan Orme, and to the Yorkshire NUM. BSC wanted a guaranteed supply of 5,000 tonnes of coking coal a week.

Rather than reject BSC's demands, Jack Taylor promised to raise them at both the Yorkshire and national executive of the NUM. But the Scunthorpe management had observed the successful use of lorry convoys to break the miners' picket lines at Ravenscraig. They decided to organise a similar scab operation, this time to move stocks to Scunthorpe from the Orgreave coking plant near Rotherham.

This decision, like all major moves against the miners, was taken only with Downing Street's approval. **The Observer** reported on 3 June that BSC had 'approached the government early last month for the go-ahead, but it was only two weeks ago that the Cabinet committee looking after the crisis gave British Steel the green light.'

The first scab lorries left Orgreave on Wednesday 23 May. But the Yorkshire NUM leaders were slow to react. Taylor and the Area vice-president, Sammy Thompson, talked to the steel unions in the hope of arriving at a Ravenscraig-style compromise. Meanwhile they continued to send the majority of pickets fruitlessly to Nottinghamshire, dividing the remainder between Orgreave and Scunthorpe.

Nevertheless, the momentum for a mass picket of Orgreave began to build up. Activists in the South Yorkshire pits heard of the scabbing operation around the coke plant and reacted by picketing it unofficially. As one South Yorkshire miner tells:

They'd started running coke out of Orgreave the previous week. We heard about it from lads who'd inform the South Yorkshire strike centre at Silverwood whenever they saw any coal or coke moving. We went to see what was happening. On the Wednesday pickets who'd returned from Nottingham heard about it and 500 went to Orgreave. The police penned us up against a wall. But some lads got through onto a golf course that runs by the road and bricked lorries as they came off the motorway.

On the Thursday the number picketing rose to about a thousand. Pouring rain deterred militancy on the Friday, but pickets were back in large numbers on the Sunday. Then they were joined by Scargill himself, who called for mass pickets of the coking plant. He repeated the call that evening at a rally for miners from South Kirkby and Frickley collieries. Jack Taylor, who shared the platform with Scargill, studiously avoided mentioning Orgreave. Challenged by activists who said that 15,000 pickets could close the plant, the leader of the biggest NUM Area angrily asked: 'Where do I get 15,000 men from?' There were 50,000 miners in Yorkshire — all of them on strike.

Nevertheless, Taylor was goaded into action. The next day, Monday 28 May, the Yorkshire pickets were sent to Orgreave. There were between two and three thousand of them, heavily outnumbering the police, who seem to have been taken by surprise by the large turn-out. The next day both miners and police were out in force. The result was the greatest violence seen in a British industrial dispute since before the First World War.

The organisation of the picketing at Orgreave that Tuesday gave a glimpse of how the strike could have been won. Every picket in the Yorkshire Area was instructed to be at Orgreave at 7.45 a.m. 'We had a map, instructions where to stand — the best guidance we ever had,' a miner from South Kirkby said afterwards. About five thousand pickets turned up. 'There were people there from South Kirkby we hadn't seen picketing before. It was great.'

The meticulous organisation suggested that Scargill's hand was at work. He took personal charge at the gates of the plant, using a megaphone to direct the pickets as they pushed against the police line. Jack Taylor was also present, but stood at some distance from the picket line, looking on.

The police, this time some five thousand strong, found themselves under serious pressure. The coke works at Orgreave is sited in a hollow through which runs one of the roads between Sheffield and Rotherham. The pickets would assemble on the Sheffield side of the plant, in a housing estate beyond which the roads ran through a railway bridge downhill to the coke works. Between the bridge and



Orgreave: The police horses move in, trapping pickets

the plant the road passes through wheatfields. The police deployed their main force directly in front of the coke works. Mounted police, looking like Civil War cavalry in their riot helmets, were deployed in the field to the right of the road, Alsatian dogs and their handlers to their left. There were more police the other side of the bridge, so that the pickets were surrounded.

Miners as they arrived were forced away from the entrance of the plant, and penned in on a stretch of grass in front of the works on the side of the road. Many pickets simply stood around in this pen. They had spent the previous eleven weeks scattered throughout Nottinghamshire, and had no experience of mass pickets. However, at the end closest to the plant, a minority marshalled by Scargill pushed hard, almost breaking the police line.

The police reacted ferociously. Early in the afternoon, after the lorries had entered the plant, the riot squad, who had been deployed in the main police body in front of the works, were unleashed on the pickets. 'It was like a rugby scrum. The police had their shields up in the air, walloping people with truncheons,' one picket said. A succession of baton charges were made against the pickets — though in one case the police waited until they had passed out of range of a TV camera before drawing their truncheons.

Three of the charges involved mounted as well as foot police. The horsemen went first, followed by foot squads. The mounted police wielded their long riot sticks against the pickets — the first time the sticks had been drawn since anti-Nazi demonstrator Kevin Gately was killed in a mounted police charge in Red Lion Square, London, in June 1974. Two women from the Silverwood miners' support group were among those attacked by mounted police. Police dogs were also used against pickets.

Despite the savagery of the police, and 83 arrests, the miners did not come away from Orgreave that Tuesday disheartened. At last they were using their picketing power against economic targets. Had the picket been sustained and built on, the story of the strike might have been very different. 'Tuesday we were walking on air,' one South Kirkby miner said. Scargill appealed to 'all miners and the whole trade union movement to come here in their thousands.'

But it was not to be. 'Prepare to be disappointed,' a branch official told Silverwood miners that same Tuesday evening. At 3 a.m. the next morning Yorkshire miners received the day's picketing instructions in the sealed envelope from the Area headquarters in Barnsley. They were to go to Nottinghamshire, not Orgreave.

'Sabotage' was one miner's comment.

The decision to divert the pickets to Nottinghamshire was undoubtedly that of Jack Taylor and the Yorkshire Area executive. Scargill himself acknowledged his impotence. When he was asked by flying pickets at Orgreave on Tuesday whether they would be getting help from Scotland and Wales, he replied: 'Each Area has its own autonomy. Unfortunately, I don't have the reins.'

Scargill went to Orgreave that Wednesday morning. Arriving at



Orgreave:
The police
charge

about 7.45 a.m., he found perhaps a hundred pickets there, many of them from outside Yorkshire. Armed with his megaphone, he marshalled about half of them — the rest refused to join in, saying they should wait till more pickets turned up — and led them to where the miners had stood the day before. The senior police officer, Chief Superintendent John Nesbitt, ordered Scargill to move. Scargill refused, and was eventually arrested.

A total of about eight hundred miners eventually went to Or-



greave that day, many after having been turned back by police road blocks in Nottinghamshire. The afternoon saw more fighting, but this time the police had the whip hand.

Some pickets were chased up the road by mounted police and into a brick yard. Riot police pushed them up against a wall and started beating them. Naturally enough the miners defended themselves with whatever came to hand. One of them recalled later:

Ogmore:
Pickets attempt
to break police
lines



A big lad came along and told us to stop bricking. He stood in front of the cops so that if we chucked any more bricks we'd hit him. Suddenly the wall of riot shields opened up and he was dragged in. We could see him on the ground with boots and truncheons going into him.

Orgreave that day saw miners forced by the police violence to abandon the pacifism so deeply rooted in the British labour move-



ment. The scenes — a barricade was built to block the police charges — were more reminiscent of the 1981 inner-city riots than of a picket line. But despite the militancy, the decision to send the pickets to Nottinghamshire had shifted the balance of forces in the state's favour. There were 35 arrests.

The Yorkshire NUM headquarters at Barnsley instructed the Yorkshire pickets to go to Nottinghamshire that Thursday and Friday as well. On Thursday 1,500 miners defied these instructions and went to Orgreave anyway. They pushed at the police lines when the lorry convoys went in and out. But they were directionless. Scargill, once he had been released on bail on Wednesday afternoon, did not return to the picket line that week. To judge by what he said on leaving Barnsley Magistrates' Court, his eyes were now fixed on the talks with the NCB: 'This dispute must be brought to a swift conclusion.' Heathfield too had made his priorities clear on Tuesday evening, declaring: 'I hope we shall be able to lay the foundations of a settlement.'

But it takes two to tango. A settlement would depend on the Tories', as well as the NUM's, willingness to settle. The government and the Coal Board seem to have been drifting towards some sort of compromise. Orgreave transformed the situation. The police had got away with beating up hundreds of miners and arresting Arthur Scargill in the heart of the Yorkshire coalfield, near Sheffield, one of the great centres of the British labour movement.

All the signs are that the Tories scented blood after the first big battle at Orgreave. If they could get away with what they had done there, then they could realistically plan to inflict a decisive defeat on the miners as an example to the rest of the trade union movement. Should power station coal stocks run dangerously low, then the same sort of combination of riot police and scab lorry drivers used at Ravenscraig and Orgreave could be employed to shift the coal stock-piled at the pitheads.

Suddenly the stakes had been sharply raised. On 30 May, the day Scargill was arrested, Thatcher made a speech in Banbury declaring 'the rule of law must prevail over the rule of the mob,' and backing the police riot at Orgreave. Two days later she told an interviewer that she did 'not see an immediate end' to the strike.¹⁰

On 12 June *The Times* published an interview with Ian MacGregor which torpedoed hopes that the issues might be fudged. 'Uneconomic' pits would have to close, he said, though the surviving miners would be better paid. Ominously he spoke of 'regaining the



Orgreave: Mounted police hunt down pickets

management of the industry', implying an end to consultation with the NUM at all levels.

The interview spelled out what the miners were up against — the logic of world capitalism:

I think the only thing the government is interested in is seeing this business run properly and by that I mean that its resources are exploited in such a way that it is a positive contribution to our economy rather than a drain. That is all the politics I know of. I am not one of your local characters. I don't vote here — I vote in Florida.

The NUM reacted angrily. Scargill accused MacGregor of being 'intent on butchering this industry'. The miners' leaders were further infuriated to learn that the NCB were thinking of organising their own pithead ballot. The day after the MacGregor interview was published, talks between the NUM and the Coal Board broke up acrimoniously.

The Economist was in no doubt that Downing Street was responsible:

Why did Mr MacGregor change tactics and speak out? The Coal Board, improbably, denies there was any pressure from the government. Officials say they wanted to disabuse wavering miners who might have thought that concessions were around the corner. But ministers have been growing worried that Mr Scargill was going to get a deal that he could trumpet as a victory. The government wants to be seen to have broken the legendary power of the miners.¹¹

The collapse of negotiations cut off the NUM soft left's escape route. It came at a time when the divisions between Scargill and the rest of the left officials were coming into the open. On 7 June, six days before the talks were broken off, thousands of miners had marched through London to lobby parliament. The police attack on the march — 120 arrests were made — brought the war in the coalfields on to the streets of the capital.

Scargill had told the lobby: 'I'd dearly love to see every member of the NUM and every trade unionist down at Orgreave.' Resentment towards him among the Yorkshire officials deepened. A notice was posted up at NUM headquarters in Barnsley: 'All deployment of pickets is done by the Yorkshire Area Strike Organising Committee. Pickets are only to be deployed to targets authorised by them. Any requests for pickets from National Office or other Areas to be referred to the Co-ordinating Committee.' The decision by the union's delegate conference to vest control of the strike in the national officers of the union was a dead letter. Taylor called off the remaining pickets at Orgreave.

Scargill had also clashed with Emlyn Williams, the South Wales NUM president, who attacked his calls for an end to the dispensations to British Steel. 'I run South Wales,' Williams told the media, 'no one else.' On 12 June the South Wales NUM guaranteed Llanwern two dozen trainloads of coal a week.

But the following day, once the government had torpedoed the talks, the Area leaders were forced to shift their ground. Almost overnight they did an about-turn. Meeting on 14 June, the national executive decided to end all dispensations to the steel industry. At the Yorkshire miners' gala in Wakefield that weekend Jack Taylor made a fighting speech. The Coal Board had just been playing a 'game', 'raising the miners up, and then dropping us down again.' In future,

there must be 'no secret meetings, no sell-outs and no secret deals.'

This new tough line was soon put to the test, once again at Orgreave. The Yorkshire NUM mobilised 5,000 pickets to the coking plant on Monday 18 June. Again Scargill was there. An orgy of police violence followed.

The police were under heavy pressure, pushed hard by the pickets. One miner described the situation:

The police reserves kept fanning in to back up the people in front. The police were bunched together 15–20 rows deep. It was very hot and the police were heavily dressed in their riot gear. They were fainting in the ranks, dropping like ninepins. So they started truncheoning us. Before at Orgreave the pickets were let to push. This time two rows back the police were truncheoning pickets. The first three or four rows of pickets got truncheoned. So they started bricking.

Meanwhile about a thousand miners had got into the plant itself from the back. The pump house was attacked and railway waggons full of coal were opened up and immobilised. One of them tells:

The police sent in squads, there was a little battle. But the police realised they were outnumbered and simply tried to shunt pickets away from the plant. But the majority of the pickets in the plant went on to move against the rear of the main police lines. The police were now sandwiched and under increasing pressure. Any reinforcements they tried to get through were bombarded with bricks and held back.

The main police line was pushed until it was only 200 yards from the main body of pickets. If the main body had charged forward the police line would have been broken and the plant shut. This didn't happen because those with megaphones among the main body of pickets never gave the order.

The incident shows that mass pickets could have beaten the police at Orgreave — especially if the momentum of that day had been built on to get even greater numbers of pickets out the next day. During these offensives by the miners against the police lines, there were very few pickets hurt by the police, or arrests. These came later in the day, as a miner described:

Then the lorries went out. Normally there was a lull. Lots of people went into the village for a drink. Then when they came back, the police had advanced their line a couple of hundred





yards. People wandered back, and met people like something out of *Doomwatch* in black masks and overalls.

The riot squads ran amock, flailing with shields and truncheons, and backed up by horsemen. ‘They were out to maim,’ one miner said, ‘not to arrest.’ Another miner said:

There weren’t many arrests at the time. People got arrested when they went to hospital. One lad was surrounded by horses and beaten to the ground. I tried to talk him to go to hospital. But when we got there we were told not to go in — they were arresting injured miners.

Among those taken to hospital was Arthur Scargill. Tony Clements, Assistant Chief Constable for South Yorkshire, claimed that Scargill had slipped and banged his head on a railway sleeper. A miner from Silverwood described what really happened:

Late on the coppers were pushing us back with cavalry and riot police charges. Some lads were throwing stones. Arthur came down to tell them not to be so stupid and that we need numbers to beat the police. Then he stood on the side of the road, on a small hill, and the riot cops charged again. People legged it. I saw two coppers go up to Arthur. He got a knock with a shield, then I saw batons in the air. I couldn’t see any more — I was legging it myself.

This second battle of Orgreave could have been the beginning of a real attempt to win the strike by mass picketing. But the next day the pickets were again sent elsewhere.

There were no more mass pickets of Orgreave after 18 June, but at least mass picketing had been tried there. This could not be said for South Wales or Scotland.

Scargill had persuaded the transport unions to agree to a blockade of power stations and a restriction of BSC’s coal supplies on 7 June. The move had the advantage of taking some of the initiative away from the Area unions. On 18 June the Scottish Triple Alliance decided to halt the supply of coal to Ravenscraig — and BSC restarted its road convoys of scab lorries.

In South Wales railwaymen blocked the supply of coal and coke to Llanwern. Then the transport unions threatened to block all supplies of iron ore to BSC to force the steel unions to agree to cut steel production. But talks between the ISTC and the NUM on 29 June

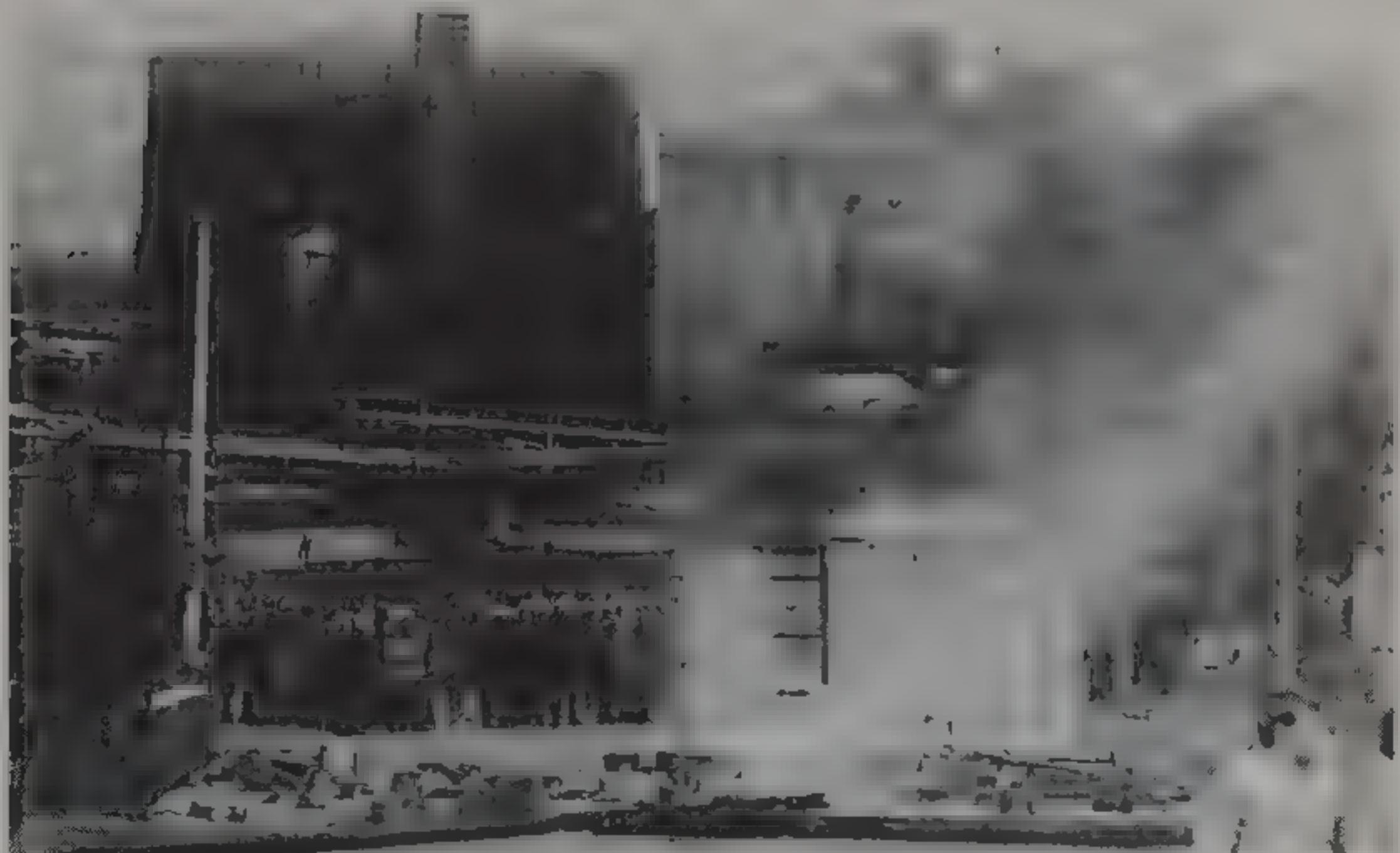
ended without agreement — and the TUC steel committee backed ISTC leader Bill Sirs, declaring that 'it would not be practicable to accede to the NUM's request.'

The miners and their allies responded by carrying out their threat to cut off iron ore as well as coal to the steel plants. Railwaymen refused to take their trains across NUM picket lines. BSC mounted an enormous scab operation to move the coal and ore to Raverscraig and Llanwern by road. By 3 July convoys involving 100 lorries a day were running between Port Talbot and Llanwern.

Kim Howells, a research officer for South Wales NUM who spent much of the strike talking to the media on the union's behalf, argued later that the lorry operation was unbeatable by mass picketing:

Challenging lines of single-minded and well-equipped policemen . . . had already been tried in most spectacular fashion at Orgreave . . . It never succeeded in stopping a single lorry nor a scab and taught us in South Wales a good deal about what to do to win friends and influence people during industrial disputes.¹²

The truth was rather different. The South Wales NUM responded to the lorry convoys to Llanwern by mounting only *token* pickets. **The Times** reported on 23 June: 'The South Wales miners' leaders concluded that they had no need to mobilise their flying



Orgreave: At the end of the day

pickets after their researchers had calculated that the corporation could not possibly maintain supplies to the plant by lorry convoys.'

The researchers calculated wrong. Howells, whose own research department made this brilliant prognosis, admitted six months later: 'By October, the steelmen were receiving over twenty thousand tonnes of coal and coke a week — over twice the amount we'd allowed them before the total "blockade" had been declared.'¹³

The reality was that the South Wales miners' leaders were opposed to mass pickets, and did not use them to enforce the blockade of Llanwern. The same was true of the Scottish NUM, which made no attempt to repeat the mass picketing of Ravenscraig in May.

The lessons of Orgreave

In the wake of the police riot at Orgreave, many people were sympathetic to the argument that the police were now unbeatable. The miners had tried to use the methods of 1972, and had failed. But those who argued thus forgot two things.

First, in 1972 the flying pickets had concentrated their forces on successive targets until the movement of coal and other fuels had been blocked at each site. The way in which the Yorkshire NUM organised pickets in 1984 rendered such an approach impossible. Under the 'envelope system' miners were sent to different targets each day. Taylor and the rest of the Yorkshire Area leadership refused to campaign openly and consistently for a mass picket of Orgreave — even at the Wakefield Gala two days before the second battle of Orgreave on 18 June.

Secondly, the decisive use of flying pickets in 1972 was, of course, at Saltley. But, in Scargill's words, 'the working class closed Saltley,' not the miners. Miners toured Birmingham factories and won an unofficial strike by 100,000 engineering workers, 20,000 of whom joined the miners' picket line at Saltley.

No effort was made at Orgreave to apply this, the most important lesson of Saltley. The first battle of Orgreave was in late May, when most steel and engineering workers in Sheffield and Rotherham were on a week's holiday. But had the Yorkshire miners' leaders campaigned consistently to build the Orgreave picket over a number of days, or even weeks, miners could have been taken round the Sheffield engineering factories to appeal for delegations to join their picket line. Engineering workers who saw the police violence for themselves might then have been willing to mount sympathy action.

Instead, the Yorkshire miners' leaders preferred to rely on spectacular, one-off pickets, and on their connections with full-time officials in other unions. As one Silverwood miner said: 'They wanted to arrange everything between the ISTC and the NUM. They're happy to keep the rank and file passive, keeping all the decisions themselves.'

It remains to explain why it was that the Yorkshire NUM leaders, and their counterparts in other left-wing Areas, behaved so disastrously. They were neither knaves nor fools, but, in the main, dedicated socialists, on the left wing of the Labour Party or in the Communist Party. Many of them had played an active part in the rank-and-file militancy of the late 1960s and early 1970s. What had gone wrong?

Three factors were involved. First, the Yorkshire left in particular had changed. In the early 1970s, they were in opposition to the right-wing Area and national leaderships. They were, in the main, rank-and-file activists, holding office at branch level, if at all. Now they were part of the union bureaucracy.

In power, Jack Taylor and the rest came more and more to identify with the interests of the union machine rather than with the miners they were supposed to represent. Despite the Area's enormous assets (£8 million at the beginning of the strike), they grudged the money needed to sustain effective flying pickets. Their whole strategy had become one of reliance on manoeuvres at the top, treating ordinary miners like a stage army.

Secondly, class collaboration was embedded in the politics of the NUM left. Like the left wing of the trade union bureaucracy generally, they were supporters of the 'alternative economic strategy' — using the power of the state to shore up the British economy. As many of its specific measures showed — notably import controls — the strategy presumed the existence of a common British 'national interest' uniting workers and capitalists against their foreign rivals.

The miners' Area leaders, especially in Scotland and South Wales, had devoted considerable energy to campaigns, often organised with the regional TUCs, to defend their local economies. They had come to see these campaigns as the only effective way of defending their members' jobs. They had lost sight of the fact that Scotland and Wales, not to speak of England, were part of a world economic system controlled by a small minority. The mines and the steelworks belonged, not to those who worked in them, but to the capitalist class.

Class collaboration was deeply rooted in the miners' union itself.

Ever since nationalisation, the NUM had been involved in a ramified system of co-operation with the Coal Board. Even Arthur Scargill, a formidable critic of 'workers' participation' because of its use to co-opt workers' leaders, based his opposition to the closure of high-cost pits on the 1974 Plan for Coal, whose evident aim was to draw the NUM into shared responsibility for running the industry with the Coal Board. The same attitudes were expressed more crudely by other miners' leaders. Jack Taylor, for example, declared: 'Even if he [MacGregor] won this dispute outright, he would lose everything. After all, he can't run a coal industry without the NUM . . . The one thing they can't do is run a successful coal industry on their own.'¹⁴

There was a third factor. There were two main currents in the NUM left. The first was predominant in Yorkshire, and consisted largely of left-wing members of the Labour Party — Scargill, Heathfield, Taylor and Briscoe, for example. The other was the Communist Party, still, despite its decline, a powerful force in South Wales, Scotland and Kent — though there were important Labour left-wingers in these Areas — Emlyn Williams, for example, and the Scottish NUM general secretary, Eric Clarke.

The Communist Party began, in the early months of the strike, to develop a critique of 'Scargillism' — that is, of reliance on the methods of 1972, above all, of mass picketing. In line with its general rightward or 'Eurocommunist' evolution, the Communist Party argued that the NUM should eschew industrial confrontation, and instead build a 'broad democratic alliance'.

Thus, after the collapse of Mick McGahey's attempt to reduce the flow of coal into Ravenscraig, Peter Carter, the Communist Party's industrial organiser, praised the NUM's 'great and generous concession'. He continued:

But trade union solidarity alone, important though it is, is not enough. A wider public support has to be won to support the miners. It would be dangerous and sectarian to think that a major industrial dispute of this character can be won by industrial muscle alone, even in the face of hostile public opinion . . . Any projection of the strike as a political strike aimed at bringing the government down will be of no help to the miners — quite the reverse.¹⁵

Carter's alternative was that the miners should concentrate on 'winning wide sympathy . . . building a broad alliance around their

objectives'. George Bolton, Scottish NUM vice-president, spelled out what this alternative strategy involved a few months later:

I'm not opposed to mass picketing. The mass pickets are a very important weapon in our armoury. What I would argue is that you must think very carefully when and how you use it . . . The government and the board have consistently tried to contain the argument to the question of mass pickets, violence and law and order; and they have avoided like the plague any discussion of what the dispute is all about. Their strategy has been to pin us down on the law and order question. That tells you that they have a real fear of a mass understanding by the British people of what the dispute is all about . . .

A very good example is Ken Livingstone and the GLC. He's winning his case because he's finding it possible to talk politically in a mass way, and demonstrating in practice that the people are backing him and not the Tory government . . . I happen to think the question of the culture and the arts is very important. We need to try and get the world of entertainment identified with us, not least because they get mass audiences.¹⁶

How a few rock concerts would cow a government which respects only power, and which had shown itself absolutely determined to crush the miners, Bolton did not explain. But one thing is crystal clear: the miners were being led by men unwilling to mobilise their members' full strength. The only significant exception was Arthur Scargill himself.

This failure of leadership explains the debacle of Orgreave. The two battles outside the coke works marked the turning point of the strike, just as Saltley gates had in 1972. This time, however, the ruling class won.